

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**THE WORKING PEOPLE OF LOWELL
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK
MARY BLEWETT/MARTHA MAYO**

INFORMANT: SAMUEL S. CRAYTON, SR.

INTERVIEWER: PAUL PAGE

DATE: JUNE 19, 1985

P = PAUL

S = SAMUEL

Tape 86.19

P: We are here today with Samuel Crayton. My name is Paul Page, and we're at the Lowell Historic Preservation Commission. And we'll be talking about Samuel's background in Lowell, and what it was like to live here, what he experienced when he first came here, and what the present and the future will hold. So, so tell me what brought you to Lowell?

S: Well a job. I happened to be considered an expert in the container industry, and the people that I was working for in Brooklyn, New York, the Vice President and General Manager bought interest in A&P Corrugated, which was located here in Lowell. And after six months or so he contacted me. And he first asked me to come up and train a person for a machine that they had. I came up to Lowell for a week. I believe that was in either March or April 1940. And within a week I guess, mostly, you can teach a man they say, you give him the theory of operating a machine, but he will not have the fine tuning of operating. So he didn't make very much progress. In the fall, November, I was contacted again by the same person, and offered me a good deal. Of course at the time blacks who were not to, being offered those type of jobs. And I thought it was an opportunity and I came to Lowell to stay, but after coming here I, personally I didn't like it. So he kept asking me about moving my family here. But I didn't move my family here until about two and a half years after, because I was hoping that something would go wrong that I would have an opportunity to quit.

P: So what didn't you like about it?

S: Well one thing I didn't like the, well one, the attitude of the people. You see Lowell, I was strictly was accustomed to the hustle and bustle of competition. Here I had no competition, because I came here with a job, a specific purpose to setup and run a

machine that was the first of its kind in the city. And it was just that. Otherwise, in New York, see that same type of operation, it would be, you'd meet someone everyday that was just as good as you or trying to be better than you on the same type of work. But here in Lowell it was quite different. And as far as the people that I worked with, seemingly they were you might say cordial and they accepted me. And you know, it was no, because they didn't know how to operate the machine, but I felt that if they knew how to operate that particular machine there would have been some friction, because they would have felt that I was coming in and taking that job, because at the time there was a refugee from Germany working on the machine. And I heard one of the fellows tell another fellow you know, that he didn't think that this fellow should come over here and get one of the better jobs in there, you know. And then I, otherwise it made me think, while they wasn't saying anything to me, but perhaps they were feeling the same thing. But see I felt safe because they did not know how to operate my machine. This fellow of course he didn't stay very long. Anyway, he was Jewish refugee and he worked, and very good at his work, but they still resented the idea the he come in and got on you know, a machine. I had to experience the same situation in Brooklyn where they would come over with the training, I mean you know, they came over, they were good, very good mechanics and they would go right to the top because they knew the job. Also, New York is a lot different than Lowell see, because if you got laid off on this type of work, or you got mad and you wanted to quit, you could go maybe ten blocks and the same job might be opened to you, you know, because there were so many manufacturers of corrugated boxes. And so I worked there for (--)

P: Where, now where was this?

S: This was out on Middlesex Street.

P: You don't remember its name? (S: Huh?) Do you remember the name of the company?

S: A&P Corrugated.

P: Oh, that's right, yah.

S: I mean of course a lot of people when you say A&P they think you're talking about the A&P Stores, but this was A&P Corrugated. They finally sold, closed the plant here and moved to Gardner, but the (--) Now there's no more A&P Corrugated. They were bought out and the buyer changed the name. It's Mead Container now. But other than that I finally moved my family here in 1943.

P: Now how many other, did you meet other black people here in Lowell?

S: Yah, before I moved my family here I met all of the black families in Lowell.

P: How did that come about?

S: Going to church. I met them at church. Well I attend all of the standard Protestant Churches. See I'm a Protestant. Methodist, I was brought up Methodist.

P: What, could you just tell me the full name of the church?

S: Highland Union Methodist Church. That's the church that my family was introduced to when they came to Lowell. Now that came about because once I brought my family here a lady stopped by to see my wife, see the family. She inquired of what church that we attended, whether we were Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, or Congregationalist. My wife told her that we were Methodist because that was the closest church to us. It was in the Highlands. We lived on, moved on Bellevue Street and the church was on Grove and Loring Street. It was just a few blocks away. So that was all right, but I had already attended the Baptist Church and other Methodist churches, but of course at the time I didn't think of joining any other church but the Methodist Church, you know. My children were all small and I wanted them to be brought up Methodist. And I met all of them. Most of the families were Baptist. There were a couple of other Methodist families, but all of the time you did not see them on the streets. I mean you could come downtown walk around everyday of the week you'd never see a black face. And people would look at you as though you were from outer space. Of course that didn't bother me because I was the type of fellow that what I was looking for. I had a good job. I had a family, and a home for them and that was just it. But still you were stared at, I mean you know, because they didn't see too many blacks.

P: Well I've lived in Iowa just about five years ago. I was going to college out there. And Iowa, well Dubuque, I don't know if you know anything about it, but it's actually doesn't have many blacks there, but the school I was going to had, well practically 20-30% of the student body was black. (P: Is that right?) I was in a seminary. It was a missionary order, and they had missionary houses in the United States in some of the poorer areas like Chicago, Louisiana, parts of Southern California there around not [unclear], but Riverside and that area. And so the people used to tell me, some of my classmates would tell me the same things that you are talking about were still being experienced in Iowa, because there were no, no blacks. We were living in the farming community. It was German and Irish, very closed, it was very closed minded. Well anyways, I just think it's interesting that here you are in Lowell with (--)

S: You might say all the way across, and you're running against the same situation. Well I mean that is because you see, well I found that Lowell, which I never really agreed to, they say you know, you hear a lot of it. I know even at your young age we take care of our own. I mean that means that all the jobs, if there are any, the people we know, our relatives get them first, and Lowell is very noted for that. I mean when the company that I worked for, A&P Corrugated, I seen the times that twelve people from the same family were working in that company. And then that was one family. Then you'd find another family with six, or seven people working in there. I mean to me that was amusing, because, and New York, and Brooklyn where we worked, New Jersey I mean, where we lived, companies there always practiced just one or two people per family for the simple reason as this, if you had say a tragedy, what I mean by a tragedy, a death in the family,

you would be in dire straits for help. I mean you say like twelve people, you would have out that day, or two days twelve people you know, would be out of you know, if they were in what you call operators on machines. I mean you would have to practically shut down a department. They finally change it, changed that habit, because you know, it's nothing against the people, but you know, you have to maintain your standard of operation. Because you might say you hope one doesn't lose a loved one, but if they did you wouldn't want your customers to go without their supplies. So the operation was changed and then they cut it down. In some cases it was only one per family.

P: So in your first job here you, would you say you experienced any sort of discrimination that you knew of?

S: Well my job there, I mean there with A&P Corrugated I didn't feel any discrimination. I mean if anyone felt any ill-will towards me they didn't, didn't show it. I mean because they knew that (--) Well you see in Lowell I felt discrimination. You know we moved, I moved my family into Bellevue Street. The neighbors, nobody talked to us. Only one man who lived on the street talked to us, and that was (--) I don't remember his name now. He was an elderly man, and he was the, what you call (--) You know, they had what you called either a fire warden, or some warden that told you where the shelters were in case you know, during the war in case you know, an air raids or something would come over. He was to get everyone together. What did they call those people then? Well anyway, he was some type of community warden. So he'd come up to the house and told me the rules and everything, give me the names of the street, the place where the shelter were and so forth. And that's the only time that he ever spoke to me, and it was the only time I ever spoke to him. Well it was just a coolness. And then you're walking up the street. You could see people pulling their shade back to get a look, instead of just coming on out. Well just back track, it was another lady who lives across the street. Her name was Mrs. O'Sullivan, but there was also a Mrs. Sullivan that lived right in front of us. She was, well one of the most I would say uncomfortable people that I've ever known. But Mrs. O'Sullivan said, "The hell with her. She is no better than you. Do what you live and take care of your family, and pay no attention to her." She was Mrs. O'Sullivan. I mean she was a big, strapping Irish woman, you know, and she you know, at least she did make us welcomed to the community. I didn't know this, see a petition on Bellevue Street was gotten up to, well to make a public protest of me living there, but they wanted to do it through, legally through A&P Corrugated. So they got a lawyer and the lawyer happened to call A&P Corrugated to tell them what he represented these petitioners. It just happened so that he called the day that the President of the company was there, and he really told him off. He said that, he told them you know, if anything happens to that man's family that caused him to be concerned about their safety that he can't perform for us, what we brought him here for, our loss we will sue from the petitioners." He said: "You can count on him." And he said, "We're willing to back him for a million dollars." Well I didn't know about that see. About a year after I happened to be in the office and he was there. So he asked me how was you know, the family and how was I getting along, and how were the neighbors and so forth and so on. And then you know, by that time the people had really warmed up and found out that we weren't from outer space. You know, we were normal, working, church going people the same as

they were, you know. And I told him it's fine. Then he told me the story that I just related to you about the petition, you know. You know, it's funny. I'll tell you another story that also happened that I would say, help break the ice. There was an elder man lived below us in order to get the bus he had to pass our house. Well my wife was very, well loving and caring about her children, you know. She'd be playing in the front yard and she would be near, or she would be in hearing distance of everything said, and so forth and so on. And this man, well the kids were playing around there. They'd come up and they'd stand across the street you know, and they'd call my kids niggers. My kids, even though that we are Negros, black, and so forth, they never really heard the word "nigger," because the community that we lived in Jersey City, and the people that we socialized didn't use slang. So they came in and they asked their mother what was a "nigger?" And she told him a nigger was is a low, degraded person that you should stay away from. Now that's the definition of a nigger in the old dictionaries, but see, modern dictionaries now, they'd say is the slang word for the darker Negroid people. (P: Yah) This man walking by this morning going to get his bus, and my oldest son, which was about five, or five and a half years old I believe at the time, he said, "Hello Nigger." That man turned around just like he stepped on a pen. He looked as though he was going to come back, and then he walked on. The next morning he stopped and talked to the kids. From then on that was a regular ritual every morning that he passed by. The kids were out there playing he'd stop and talk to them. And you know, it (--)

P: Why did he do that?

S: Why? I never asked him why he did that. I'm just saying about how he reacted to he kids calling him a nigger. You know chances are he, well he was from the old school too. He I knew what the definition was, you know, that low degraded person. He did not want to be identified as that type of person. So he proved to the children that he wasn't all that bad. But to, you know, of course today it's a different story. The definition of the word has been, I don't know whether it's been elevated you know, or degraded you know, whichever way you want to look at it.

P: I think that they've tried to sweep it out of the language. [Unclear]

S: Sweep it under the rug, you know. I mean you know, in case that anyone would use it, it's just a slang word so just pay no attention to it. Now (--)

P: So you were working at this company?

S: Well that's the only company that I worked for since I've been here. And after I left them I went in business for myself.

P: This is your business.

S: Yes, that's S. S. Crayton and Sons.

P: Paper hanging, well, wall paper. I've just been thinking of doing something like that at my house. And I was talking to people. I said, "What's it like to hang wall paper?" This one lady said, "Well me and my husband get together and we manage to get up two strips of paper before we are about ready to kill each other. So I said, "Maybe I won't try it."

S: Well that's a good trade for a young person. Do you realize what people, what a man (--) I have seen the times that I would hang seventy rolls of paper a day. Do you realize how much I would make today if I was young and was able to do that? \$700.00, that's the minimum. You'd get, people (--) \$10.00 a roll I mean they'd get for hanging good wall paper. I mean when I was doing it you were lucky to get \$1.00 a roll. And then some of the people would bargain you down. If they knew you, and knew that you needed money, they'd bargain you down to 75 or 80 cents. But today good paper hangers, well I know a paper hanger. He gets \$200 a day. He doesn't work by the roll, or by the hour, or anything. He works by the day whether it takes him two hours, four hours, or eight hours, it's \$200.00. And you supply the paper. All he supplies is the paste.

P: A lot of it is pre-pasted anyways now, or is that no good that stuff?

S: Well I mean the type of paper that he hangs isn't pre-pasted. I mean you know, usually he hangs the best. It's strictly, mostly two, three hundred thousand dollar homes, banks and big organizations you know, that (--) And he has got a waiting list of six or eight months ahead. People wait for him because he is good. And it's \$200 dollars a day, that's it. He doesn't argue with you. How much do you charge? \$200.00 a day. They say, "Well I don't think, it's just a small room. I don't think it will take a day. Well it doesn't make any difference lady if it takes me an hour or two hours, or eight hours, it's \$200.00. And a lot of people use him because they know they won't have any complaints. Getting back to (--)

P: Could I (--) I was just (--) Not to switch the topic too much, but I was wondering about some of the things you were doing in Lowell when you first came here. What kind of social life did you have? Was it mostly around the church, or (--)

S: Well I mean, you see I didn't (--) You mean when my family came?

P: Right. When you were still working at A&P?

S: A&P Corrugated. Well most of my life was, you might say, interwoven around the church. And then I organized the Lowell Community Social Club just for blacks. And out of the Lowell Community Social Club I organized the Merrimack Valley of the NAACP. In doing the investigation of the organization, I found that Lowell at one time had a section of the Boston branch in Lowell. Lawrence had their own independent branch, and Haverhill had their own independent branch, but they all had returned their charters because of lack of interest by the people. After carefully considering how to keep this thing going, is to have a branch that covers say from Nashua to Newburyport,

Merrimack Valley. (P: Yah) That way when Lowell got tired Lawrence could take over. Lawrence got tired, Haverhill could take over, and they could just work back and forth that way, and a branch would be here. The branch has been here now I would say for 40 years, 1946-1986, that's forty years; otherwise without any interruptions. The first president was in Lowell, and the second was in Lawrence, third Haverhill. It worked you know, right up and down the Merrimack Valley all those years back and forth that way. And because if it hadn't have been it would have, the same thing would have happened. Because you see we don't have enough people, that what we call dedicated NAACP workers to maintain the administration. We have plenty of members. We have something pretty close to 300 members, but we have about maybe 25 to 30 people that actually run the organization, make sure that everything goes the way it does, and then they say in any case of discrimination (--) We've had cases of discrimination here that we had, the NAACP had to come in and you know, as some people say, throw their weight around. That is one thing I can say for Lowell, that we always got good cooperation from the officials that were involved. I can remember that we had a case of a night club refusing to serve blacks. We didn't go to court, we went to the License Commission. And the License Commission told us right there in front of every one, that if he did not want to serve blacks, turn his license in. And if they hear of it happening again they were going to request that his license be taken away from him. Now mind you, when the NAACP, see the NAACP is strictly a legal [redressed] organization. You have to be interviewed, sign an affidavit, but you know that we could only get two people to (--) All the people, other people, there was nobody that wanted to be identified that they had been discriminated against. But the night of the hearing (--)

Tape I, side A ends
Tape I, side B begins

S: You see this is what you call, you know, they were all you know, the NAACP is taking their time. You know, they see that they were all willing to see a guy crawl, but you see they weren't willing to stand up for their rights, and you know, say in open court and say, "He refused me."

P: What were they afraid of?

S: Well I say that they were afraid that their white friends would, they would be identified as being, you know, discriminated against. They didn't want that to be known. But they wouldn't mind being down there making sure that this guy gets what he deserves.

P: Are you saying that they did want to be identified? They didn't want their white friends to know that they were being (S: Discriminated against) discriminated against?

S: Oh sure. That's the only interpretation that we can give for it. I mean you know, even though the white friends already knew it, but you know, they did not want to you know, be putting the pressure on, say this man is a friend of yours. Now I'm supposed to be a friend of yours too, but I don't want you to feel that I'm squeezing your friend.

Understand? (P: Yah) Yah, but you see that isn't the way it is done. If your friend is a cockroach, you stomp him regardless, you know. I mean this is the way it should be done, but that isn't the way it's done. You, otherwise you back off because you don't want to lose this guy's friendship. So he just let's him get away with it.

P: So you were talking about the Lowell Social Club that you organized. Did you have a headquarters for it?

S: No. (P: No) No, otherwise you see, the people that were members of this social club, say I wanted the club. The club never had a charter. See they just wanted a social place, social where they can have, you know, rent a hall and have socials, or go to someone's house and have their meetings and socialize and so forth. See in Jersey City I operated a political club of 400 families, political club. You know, and you say, you pick up the phone and you ask for something. You'd say I'm an elected official. If he could do it, even if he couldn't do it, in a meeting he's willing to get up there and fight like hell for you, because represented say maybe 400 or maybe 2,000 or 3,000 votes because of these people's friends and the influence that this club had. So I mean you got something, but if you are not chartered nobody knows you exist. I mean you can make all the phone calls you want. I mean what are you? You can't harm me, I mean because you don't vote. Lowell, the people that lived here voted, but they weren't, they didn't vote in a block, you know. And believe it or not the most of them were Republican, and Lowell has always been Democratic.

P: Yah. So did black families try to live in the same area? Was that possible? You know how the French live in one area; the Irish live in another part of the city.

S: Well they tried to, but you see it was very hard for them to do that, because a lot of landlords wouldn't rent to them. They had to accept what was available to them. And then if a person could afford to buy, he had to buy what the people would sell to them. And then of course you take some real estate fellows, you know, that they, if a black family living here, the first house they show you is near there as possible. I mean because we do not live on Bellevue Street anymore. We live on School Street. And there's a black, a house that's available, and the real estate guy, I mean he come over and he asked me did I know a colored family that would be interested in buying a house. I knew several, but I said, "Look, I said, I'm going to tell you something. I say, what you should do, you should, instead of putting this guy in front of me, you should put him two or three streets away from me." He said, "Why, don't you want it?" I said, "It isn't a question of I want it, it's the question that the other people should want to know black people. I know black people. I know white people. I have no problem with it, but they do." He said, "I never thought of it that way." I said, "Well just think of it." I said, "Now I know a fellow, and I told him, you know, I gave him three black families that would be interested." One of them bought the house, and lived there for about ten or fifteen years, and then they sold it. But after he got there another house became available. The real estate guy come up, and you know, and I told him the same thing. I said, "Look, I said, what are you trying to do? Make this block black?" I said, "You know, I'm against that."

P: Oh are you?

S: Sure.

P: Well the reason I'm surprised is because where I live the people are all from the same ethnic group and that doesn't seem to bother anyone.

S: It doesn't bother anyone, but you see but for the simple reason you haven't had a problem with another group. I mean you know your own group. I mean you see, but just suppose life happens so that you were doing to an entirely different culture you know nothing about. You would have a hell of a time. But if you would expose yourself to all these different people, you know, you would be at ease because you would look upon them as human beings, not as Irish, English, or Scotch, or so on and so on and so on. I mean but you see this is the way you might say most people in the United States have been brought up. Take care of your own. But you see your own isn't the world over. Do you understand what I'm saying? I mean well it's just like a fellow told me you know, he lives here in Lowell, he's in business. Somehow he found himself in Texas, and where he (--) That night, you know, the people happened to take a walk you know, looking around the city and so forth, and he found himself in a black neighborhood. And it happened to be, well one of the prominent big bands, this is when the big bands there, and he happened to know this band leader. And he told his wife, let's go in there, you know. He didn't think anything of it, you know, they went in. And you know, he met this band leader. They were you know, they're hugging everyone you know, and so forth. Then he found that everybody was staring at him. You know, this white fellow in Texas hugging this black guy. So the band leader told them, "It's all right folks. This fellow is from Lowell, Massachusetts." Now when he said Massachusetts, well then everybody felt ease you know. You know, they didn't think you know, anyway, you know, this guy coming in who you know, thought maybe he was in there trying you know, you didn't know who he was, but you know, he had to let him know. But you see now, if people knew each other you wouldn't create any tension of showing friendships. It is very hard, but you might say you take in the (--) Because I was telling you about this with Lowell High School. The family was here when I came here. They're gone now. And of course the father died. And they were all honored students, National Honor students. I mean they were very professional people. They all (--) Any community would love to have that type of person living in their community. I mean there wee, one is a lawyer, a doctor, a chemist. I mean you know, but yet Lowell educated them, molded their character. They went to the First United Baptist Church. What did they do? Some other communities got the benefit of all their wealth and teaching and so forth, when Lowell could have had it themselves if they had made a place for them, but there was no place for them. So they had to leave.

P: Did your children go to school here?

S: Oh yeah, my children went to school here.

P: But you might say my children went to school here, well some are still here. I have a son and two daughters are still here. But the most, my productive children, most what I say are productive are not here. Not because they, you know, didn't have jobs. I was in business for myself. They could work for me. But one of the boys that did work for me at 38 he came down with M.S. So he is home. I mean then I have a daughter that got married here. She is still here.

P: And what did your other children do?

S: Well my oldest son was just retired from the Air Force last August after 30 years. I have another daughter who graduated from college and she works for Brandeis University. I have another daughter that graduated from Northeastern. She's out in California. She works for the State of California. She couldn't get a job in Massachusetts at the time she graduated. She went to California when Reagan was Governor, and everybody was talking about Reagan you know, what he done, you know, proposition for [unclear] or something out there. She went out there and got a job. So you know, I mean I don't know how she did it, but yet she went out and got a job. And then I have another daughter, she lives here in Lowell. She got married. She used to work for the Lowell Sun. She lives in Virginia now. Of course my oldest son also lives in Virginia. He settled in Virginia. He likes it down there.

P: Yah. I don't like Virginia.

S: You don't like Virginia?

P: I don't like the heat that much. I really (--)

S: Oh, you don't like the heat.

P: Yah, anyways, because I'm in the Navy.

S: Oh you were in the Navy?

P: Yah, I'm still in the Reserves in Norfolk. We have to go down to Norfolk [unclear].

S: Well they live very near Norfolk. They live in Hampton, Virginia.

P: I don't know. I don't know that. Well when I say I go to Norfolk, the ship would just pull into the port. So I never lived there. I used to live in Pensacola, Florida. That is even hotter. (Laughs) But I have to admit that I think that one of the most beautiful states that I have ever seen was Alabama, and Georgia. Personally I liked Alabama. I felt it was a very clean state, you know, countryside. I liked the countryside. And we used to ride on [unclear] highway. I don't know the name of that highway, but there's a highway that runs (--) I think it's 90. I think they call it 90. You know from, right through Tallahassee, and Pensacola, Panama Beach and all of the rest, here to Mobile and going

right through Louisiana, New Orleans. I thought Alabama was, anyways, I thought it was the nicest state.

S: My folks are from Georgia.

P: Yah, I rode through Georgia too. I mean both states were nice, kind of rural when you were out in the city, and rolling hills. Anyways (--) Now with the NAACP, were you alone in organizing it?

S: No. You know, as I told you that these families here in Lowell, I would say the Wingood Family, Lambert Family, the Teleferos and the Whites, and the Falcons, Finnegan, those were all chartered members, but these were I would say, older people. They were all old enough for my parents. See I was the young buck, and I did all the leg work. You know I went to Haverhill, Lawrence, up and down there, and got the people to agree, you know, they accept the NAACP, the Merrimack Valley branch. They elected me as the contribution to first president. So it's been going ever since 1946, and still going. We have, now we have a banquet, annual banquet. The first banquet we had, I think, well the whole thing, where I think the whole thing was about \$65 or \$70 for the whole thing banquet. [Unclear] I don't know how many people we had, but I'm just saying how much the banquet cost. Now the banquet for just food alone costs maybe six or seven thousand dollars, because we have say, 400 to 500 people.

P: Who were some of the presidents of the NAACP? Some of the, you know (--)

S: Well I mean some are dead. Sam Crayton was the first president.

P: But not you? [Laughs]

S: Yah, I was the first president. Second president was a fellow by the name of Thomas Whiten who used to live in Haverhill. He's dead. And Reverend Fred Falcon, he lived in Lowell. He's dead. Reverend Julian Mitchell who lived in Lawrence, he's dead. And a fellow by the name of Deveau, who lived in Haverhill, he's still alive. Brown, Herbert Brown, he's still alive, but he left the area. A fellow by the name of Raymond Bell who lived in Tewksbury, he left the area. And a fellow by the name of Everett Lawrence who lived in Andover, he left, well he's dead, but he also left the area. And [Ben?] Armstrong lived in Haverhill at the time of being president. He lives in Tewksbury now. And Dracut, a fellow by the name of Jackson, Cleophas Jackson, he lives in Dracut. He works for Wang Laboratory. And while he was president he worked in the Civil Rights of the government in Boston. And the president now is Attorney [name unclear-sounds like McWhane], which he has an office on Middle Street.

P: So in the early years you had many clergymen.

S: Well that was the backbone of our organization. I mean you see, the NAACP, well regardless of how well it is represented legally, you know, they had some very good

lawyers, lawyers here in Lowell, members, charter members of the organization and so forth, but the church is the backbone of the organization.

P: And the church is the backbone of the whole, it seems to be the backbone of the black communities, or is that just generalizing?

S: Well that's generalizing. I mean of course you would say on a national scale the black church is the strongest organization that blacks have, the black church, for the simple reason is this. See, the black church, most all the denominations have their own schools, and they train their people from the cradle up, from catechism to the Bible. So they, as a close-knit productive group, but now I am not saying that all the people who go to these schools or go to church are successful. As I say, the struggle of the blacks in the United States is unparalleled to any country, even South Africa.

P: Well then the current President, President Reagan, seems to think that affirmative action isn't necessary any more, because the blacks have achieved, how should we say, equality. What would you answer to that sort of statement?

S: I would say that the President should do his own research, and not read the print that is shoved before him. If he would do his own research, I do feel that the president would make a lot of decisions that he makes now. He makes a lot of statements on the facts of other people. And if he would do his own research he would have a whole different attitude.

P: But what is your personal feeling about (S: Affirmative action?), or has not only the blacks, but well have people actually reached any sort of (--).

S: You might say parity? I mean you see the thing is that people don't seem to realize that blacks in this country for over 200 years were slaves. They weren't even allowed to read. They weren't even allowed to even talk in groups to each other. I mean you know, you will find that, you might say they are what you might call people that are born in the world. You might say, take an example of Christ. He was born in a stable, but he as a human being went beyond man. I mean I'm talking about his mind, his [think]. Now you will find black and white people are the same. They are beyond their time. You will find a lot of blacks are like that for the simple reason, even while their mother is carrying them in their womb they are talking to them, telling them what they should be, how they should be, what they should do. Even though a lot of people don't accept this, but the baby hears that, he lives that. When he comes out he sees another kid. He has to be better. But you see the thing is, I'll tell you what my oldest son told me when he went in the service. I say, listen, "Whatever you do, I say, you're going to have to pick up the dirty end of the stick. But when you put it down make sure it is clean as hell." And he was in there. He, otherwise he was, got to be so good a mechanic that all of the pilots insisted that he inspect their planes. And every time he'd come up for a, you know, a promotion, they'd take an examination. He was on TDY. You know, he was out someplace [and he didn't know it.] And he wrote back and told me, he said, "Dad, what you told me, he said, doesn't add up." He said, "I'm the best. I know I'm to the best and

everybody else knows I'm the best, but they keep me here." He said, "People don't know from nothing get promoted, but they keep me here." I wrote to Congressman Brad Morse and told him about it. Otherwise the attitude changed for him. Then they come told him, they said, "Why didn't you tell me your father, you had (P: Unclear) yah, had a friend in the Congress?" You know, they stopped pushing him around. You see the Negroes have been treated that way for generations, centuries, and they still are being treated that way. Do you realize this telephone, how many white people know that you might say they can pick up this telephone and call Colorado? If they knew that a black man invented it, the system that they were talking over, do you think that they would have respect for him? No doubt they would not. No doubt they wouldn't. They wouldn't believe that it happened, but Telephone Company will tell you that he is the inventor. He works for the telephone. He's a senior engineer for them right now, but he's retired but he goes back as a consultant. I mean you know, these are the things that people don't know what is really the contribution that blacks have made to the wellbeing of the United States and the world. It's not talked about. It's not taught in the schools, but it happened. The only people that knows it are you might say, some of the, you might say the brain trust. When they want information they know where to go get it. If they want different things they know where to go and get it. Now this isn't saying that white people aren't smart. Damn right they are smart. They got to be, because they've had everything handed to them on a platter. But the guy that you might say, you might say that I say, they had to pick up the dirty end of the stick. I mean the only way that he could get ahead, he had to put that down and it was clean. Then they look with surprise. Why did he do it? Why? And sometimes I even ask myself, why do blacks except so little when their ancestors contributed everything and receive nothing? And people talking about reverse discrimination. It's impossible. You might say for the next 100 years, if qualified blacks would get preference they still would be behind, because they have lost 200 years of service, of revenue from service. Do you understand what I'm saying? I mean, but who looks at it? You might say, well I didn't cause it. None of my people owned slaves. They did not bring any over here. But you see the thing is you are part of the bloodline that caused it, you see. But I don't hold anything against the present-day white people. The only thing that I say to them is to open your eyes while you have the time. Open your eyes and contribute to the well-being of the world, because the human being (--) You see the thing is all those souls that (--) I don't know what you, I don't know what kind of a you know, what you believe in, or what your religion is, and it doesn't make much difference, but you see I believe when a person dies the body goes back to the earth, but the spirit, the brains and ideas goes back to the source. Goes back to the source, and that source continues multiplying for the good of humans. And eventually the good is going to outweigh the bad, eventually. It might be another 50,000 years, but you know, it would be nice to know that I was on the right side.

P: Well I'm a Catholic and it's basically the same, the same, well you know, the same idea, the same Christian reverence.

S: Oh yah, that's Christianity. I mean you see the thing is, you think the Catholics had, a lot of places the Catholics had a hell of a time. You take like down South, they had a hell of time down there, but you might say they don't reach back into (--) You might say in

some cases they do, some they don't. I know some sections of the south. They do very well towards the blacks. I mean you know, they, they have schools for them. They, in South Carolina, the same way, they have, they do very well. They do, but you see the thing is, where they could make a great contribution, they don't, which is right here in Massachusetts. I mean they, otherwise they, they're just as bad as the other guy. I mean you know, it's unreasonable, but you ask yourself why.

P: Now in your case, when you wanted to start your own business, did you find that people were willing to help you, or were they trying to prevent you from (--)

S: Well I'll tell you, some, and some didn't. I've had white people, you know, you bid on it, they come up and they want something done. You give them a price. "If I have to pay that much I might as well get a white man." So what does that tell you?

P: That you must not do the same (--)

Tape I, side B ends

Tape II, side A begins.

S: Oh, about the reception I got when I went into business. Well I, you see [unclear] to go into business I had made friends with quite a few people, you know, going to church and the bank, and you know, other people that met me in the community. And a white fellow that had quite a bit of real estate, you know, he gave me a job. At first it was a small house. You know, he'd say I did a good job. And he gave me, he'd say, "How would I like to have say about seven or eight buildings to do?" you know, and you know, which would keep me pretty well occupied all summer. So these were tenements, you know, say big buildings. I said, "Well, I say, you know that would mean that I would have to have help, and you would have to make arrangements to get so much money each week." He said, "That's all right, but I want you on the job everyday." I said, "Naturally I'll be on the job everyday." "Well you know, sometime he say, you know when a fellow starts hiring help you know, he wants to take it easy." I say, "At my age, and my size of my family I can't afford to take it easy." So he gave me the job, and that got me started. For the first five years in my business I did very well. But I would say the next two to three years my friend I really was upside down. I really was upside down. What I mean by that, it seemed as though that every job I'd bid on someone would underbid me. I was so discouraged until I went to Quincy Navy Yard. I was going to get a job painting down there, you know. And I went down and I got the job, and I come back. A friend of people that I used to work for, you know, relatives to the A&P Corrugated people, lived here in Lowell, had bought a house here in Lowell and they wanted it done. So I was in between decisions. I asked my wife what should I do? If I don't take this job, then well people will just assume that I'm out of business, you know, and they won't call. But if I, you know (--) The navy job was only good for that ship. You know, a ship come in and they hiring people just for that job. When that was done that would mean I would be laid off again. She said, "Well why don't you do the house, do the work, and then you can

always get a job you know, working for somebody else. That's just the way she said it. You can always get a job working for somebody else. Why don't you do that? Maybe by that time something else will turn up. You know, I mean (--) Do you know I did lose a day for the next five years. I always had a job to go to. I mean Lowell, I would say, was a great lesson for being I would say, a good mixer. Not asking for anything, but just being there and you know, talking to people and they talk to you. Well just living.

P: So you don't think Lowell was a bad place to come to?

S: Well I would say it depends on what you are looking for. If I was a single man I would say it is not a good place. But I happen to be a family man and I had always had someone to talk to, someone to encourage me, and that was it. But I would say for a young man Lowell isn't offering much, because everyone here feel that they got to take care of their own first, and you had to take what's left. And usually there isn't anything left now with the (--) The competition have increased. See I've been in Lowell for forty-four years. When I came here you didn't have the Puerto Ricans. You didn't have the Southeast Asian people, the Cubans, the Colombians, and the Greek, Portuguese population was very small. I mean, but you see now all of these within forty-four years, all of these people have come in. And they, you might say, just like I did a lot of work for a Greek real estate man, but the same family now, they don't call me. They call, what you might say, their own that just came over last month, or last year or something, to do their work. See, that's the change that was happening.

P: But it seemed like Lowell was always you know, a city that only took, that each ethnic group looked after itself.

S: Well I mean in a sense it always, but you see the thing is, it's just like I would say God has a unique plan that blacks should be planted somewhere where they fall through the cracks, you know, or let you know that they are still there. You know, I mean, you know, it seemed that way. You know, I mean we came to Lowell. I mean we went to, a lot of people. We went to church, and the people there, a lot of us never worshipped with black people. They thought that well, you know, that I was coming in, going to take over the choir, singing. See I don't sing, I talk, but I don't sing, but I have a brother who's a singer, but I'm not a singer, I'm a talker. I guess I strangled my own voice because when I was growing up, you know, I thought there were too many black singers. I didn't want to be a black singer. I did not even want to be a minister.

P: So are you a minister now?

S: Well no. I'm not, I don't practice at it. (P: Yah) But I was educated to go into the ministry. But I don't, I never really practice at it, because at the time, I thought there were too many black preachers. But you see the thing I overlooked that people have a habit of dying. You know, I mean and each year you got to have a new crop. It's just like a farmer you know, he plants a new crop every year, and every so often you got to have a new crop of ministers. I mean if you don't have them pretty soon you going to be, the churches won't have anybody to work with. So that's where I lost out. See I didn't (--)

You see everyone advised me to stick with it. But just like young people are today, they know what's going to happen twenty years from now, you see, but I wasn't thinking of twenty years from now, I was thinking of today. I believe if I had listened I would have been a bishop, because you might say, you say, "Why do you think you would have been a bishop?" I had the connections. You see in order to be a bishop that is all you need is connections.

P: Yes, it is the same in every church I think.

S: That's right. I mean you know, of course you know you've got to have something to offer too, you know. I don't mean that you just got to be there, you know. You got to have ideas, and you got to be able to put your program over. You got to be, you know, you got to have something to give. But I could have easily got support, because my family was involved with all facets of the Methodist Church.

P: So I don't know. I was thinking of asking you this question about Reverend Sawtelle. Maybe I shouldn't ask it. He's an African Methodist Episcopal Church.

S: Well I mean you can ask me that. I mean you see the thing is, that's the church that my family has influence in. They also have influence in the United Methodist Church too. But you might say, if I had, as I say, if I had remained in church work that's where I would have been. But Reverend Sawtelle, I admire him. I don't admire him for staying there. I admire him for coming here in the first place. But I do believe that the Bishop sent him there because of the church being a small parish in a white city. That he would have attracted more white people and held on to the black people that he had. But I don't know too much about Reverend Sawtelle's leadership. I mean see, I won't mention this, but something that happened a couple of weeks ago that I was involved in, in relation to the church that Reverend Sawtelle asked me. But I do think the people over there are being unjust to him. They are not supporting him because he is white, not for any other reason. A lot of people left the church because of that, but I think that was wrong. I mean because you see, if you are a Christian, you, and especially in a Methodist church, you're supposed to accept the pastor that the Bishop in confidence sends you. See people have got to the point now that they talk up, they talk back. You know, they don't like something they write letters, and they talk you know. But they say he is not a leader. Now that I don't know. I've used Reverend Sawtelle on my program, and they have even asked me not to do it. But I mean to me the man is serving a purpose. There's a reason for him being there. Now the people that goes to that church can't see it. I feel for them. What will they do? You might say, as I told you once before, that the body goes back to the earth, but the spirit, the soul of man goes back to the source. When they get there and he's white, what are they going to do? Turn around and say I want to go back. I mean you see, all of these things they are not thinking about. You know, they just thinking. As one lady told me, you know, "Well he's taking the place of a young black minister that could be getting training. You see this church have trained some of our most powerful preachers, even Bishops. You might say did their, while they were going to school at either Boston University or Andover-Newton, was the student minister of this church. I really won't say what I would like to say. I will tell you afterwards.

P: So what do you think the future of the black community is here in Lowell? Will it get larger, will it get smaller?

S: I think it is going to get larger. I think it is going to be more effective, because you see you have a new crop of young people that is going to settle into Lowell. They will bring what you call "new spirit", new ideas, and a willing to participate. You see in the past you only had one or two people that was willing to participate publicly in Lowell. I mean you go to city hall, you see one black face there, you know. You go something like one black face, and for many years that face was just Sam Crayton's. I mean you know, they say, well I mean as the Lowell Sun said once, "He doesn't say too much, but he's just gathering information." You see sometimes you have to do that, you know. You don't go there and you might say, got there and try to take over. You go there to gather the thoughts of other people and put them together. Eventually whatever you want you will get, because nothing stays the same. You see I have, not in Lowell, I mean (--) Well I would say yes, an organization in Lowell that I joined, I was the only member in Lowell. I didn't stick my chest out and go around trying to, you know, rope everybody else into the organization. But today that same organization has gotten over 150 members in Lowell.

P: Which one is that?

S: That's the Bahai, World Faith.

P: Oh yah. (S: You've heard of it?) Yes, I know about it.

S: At one time I was the only Bahai in the city of Lowell.

P: I've looked into them a little bit. I've heard you know, what they think about. I like their (--)

S: You like their approach.

P: Yah, but that's something that should be off the tape too.

P: So was there, is there anything else that you might want to say?

S: Well the only thing that I would like to say that I really feel that the, the (--) There's one thing that I would like to point out to the, this is Lowell Historical Preservation Commission. There's one thing that I'm going to say it, but maybe I shouldn't say it but I'm old enough to say it and to get away with it. You see, it's one thing you know, Lowell is the only planned industrial city. And everybody is marveling at the rebirth of Lowell, and they seem to forget that Lowell was developed from the sweat, tears, the backs of slaves in the cotton fields of the South. You might say they are not glorying, this is overlooked. But you see the whole thing now it's been revitalized. Now you might say the country (--) That should be incorporated in how the slaves contributed to the industrialization of Lowell. (P: Yah) But to people they say that's embarrassing, but I

don't think it's embarrassing. You take every country in the history of the world had slaves. I mean you might say every nationality at one time or another have you know, have suffered this type of living. Otherwise they aren't the one to be ashamed. It's the, you might say, slave owners are the ones that should be ashamed. But you might say we overlook that fact. Someday some person is going to come along and incorporate, and give them their due.

P: And when you think of slavery, I think a lot people immediately connect it to just blacks, that only they were slaves. But a lot of people, a lot of us are slaves and we don't even know it.

S: That's true. Well you might say for the simple reason that they haven't been taught true history. They say the truth will make you free. But you see, the thing is you'll fine, you'll meet a lot of people, if they actually knew why they are who they are they would be a different person. I mean you know, you think about that, and you know, make some of the (--) So you say you went to a religious school. You'll find some very fine priests. I mean I'll talk to some that, if they could they'd change a lot of things, but you see, change, especially in religion and in politics doesn't come easy, because there is so much power; so much power. People just don't want to give up, but the might say the most powerful man that I've ever known was a man that had a little corner grocery store. He never turned down anyone that walks in and wanted credit, but he never wrote it down. You'd come in and you'd tell him you know, that you were short, you would like this and like that, he'd give it to you and never write it down. So one day his son, you know, asked him why. He said, "If he had to write it down, if he had to write it down he wouldn't give it to them." He said, "Well, he said, don't you think you'll forget?" He said, "And if I forget it, I don't need it." And do you know this was during the Depression when you know, nobody had anything. I mean you know, money, if you had a dollar you really had, you know, you really had something. Those people that he had, you know, I mean I don't know whether he'd forgotten it or not, but he was getting, making more money when you know, when everybody started back to work. You know, I have to say in the late 30s and the 40s, and 50s, he was making more money than he did in the store. People were sending him, you know, (P: Money from) from all over the country. All over the country, and a little note saying, "I don't know what I would have done if it hadn't have been for you. You know he wasn't (--)

P: He was a nobody, no one other than that.

S: I mean, and you might say now if that man, you know, if he had really wanted to exert himself for power in that community he could have been a power. Because you see everyone was grateful to him, and he didn't have no record of, you know, he couldn't go out and say, "Well you owe me \$30 or \$50." He didn't have a record of it. Maybe he could have done it, because you take some of those fellows that knows neighborhood stores, they have everything up here (points to his head) you know, they don't need a book. They know you. They don't forget. But he didn't do that. You didn't know what I owed him. Nobody knew from anything.

P: Was this person here in Lowell?

S: Oh no, no. It was in Jersey City. I mean that's when I was growing up.

P: So maybe we can just call it a day here.

S: Well I certainly appreciate talking to you. Course there's a lot that I haven't said. We could talk the rest of the day. There still would be some of the things that I would like to have said.

P: Well I can always come back. We can always get together again. It might happen, you know, because there are things that, because I always overlook things.

S: But Lowell has a lot to be thankful for. Now that's another thing too that I hope that you will remember. One of Lowell's most illustrious citizens seems to be a forgotten man.

P: Who's that?

S: That was General Butler. Ben Butler. Ben Butler was the father of civil rights along with Frederick Douglas. Of course you take the civil rights people today don't even think about those men. But you see they don't realize that they're standing on the shoulders of those men who have gone on before them. Ben Butler was a real, I don't know why Lowell doesn't seem to honor him.

[Loud sirens in background-fire trucks]

P: I think he was disgraced somewhat. I think he was relieved of his command.

S: Well you might say that he was relieved of his command because he wasn't for sale.

P: What happened? I don't know. I don't know the whole story, but it was some battle down South that he (--)

S: Did you ever read his book?

P: I've something about him, or (--) I don't know what history that was.

S: You should read, you should read Ben Butler's book and you will find out that Ben Butler was the father of you might say, the ten hour day, cutting the hours for people, working people in the mills. Of course now we have an eight hour day instead of a ten-hour day, but when he was talking about it, it was a twelve or fourteen hour day. It was sun up to sun down. But he, you know, got the ten hour day.

P: Now, but he was, sometimes I wonder. The mills were having some conflict with the South. Remember it was the southerners were working harder, longer hours.

S: That, you see, you might say naturally they were slave labor free. You might say the mills here had to pay their people. And that was part of the reason for the Civil War. You know, I mean they were getting free labor, the North had to pay their people. But you see the thing is about Butler, you know, why he measures up so much in the eyes of most blacks, is that he freed slaves as he you know, took possession of areas. And he, he admits that if it weren't for the black soldiers that he commissioned under him, the North would have lost the war. But you don't read that in history books. But you read it in his books. You read it in his book. Otherwise, not only that, there are other black, not (--) Yah, black soldiers that you might say measured up. Do you remember (--) You've known about, heard about the tough riders of Teddy Roosevelt? You realize that if it wasn't for a black soldier there wouldn't be any Teddy Roosevelt. The whole regiment would have been wiped out. Did you read that? (P: No) No, you never hear about it, but I can show it to you in print. But you see, all of these things that they didn't like Butler because he was the type of man, if you was worthy of praise he gave it to you. But if you were damned to be hung, you were hung. You know, I mean he was just that way, you know. And if he, say if he had to defend (--) Say if the court appointed him (--) I remember a case that a young fellow who broke into a very community, well influential man broke in his house, and during the struggle of the gun, the gun went off. The man was shot and he died. Now nobody wanted to take the case. Butler took the case. The kid said he did not shoot him, the gun went off as you know, and he was shot. You know, it was an accident. Nobody would believe it. But Butler proved that what the kid was saying could happen. And you know, he, people wouldn't even speak to him for that. Going out, this kid getting off free, and this honorable man [unclear].

Tape II, Side A ends
Tape II, Side B Begins.

S: But you see, after all he did accomplish. He became Governor of Massachusetts, he became a representative, and he was one of the most respected legal minds in the world. Otherwise, of course there's not too much said about him, only the bad things. And you know, there's a lot of people in Lowell. I mean I remember I was at a meeting, and I was invited to lunch at the Vesper Country Club. You know I happened to mention it, you know. And she said, "My, I thought I had to spit in somebody's soup." I mean you know it's just that they're just against him, because he was a member of what you might call a ruling class in Lowell. You know he was a Yankee, but he did an awful lot for the working man. And you might say there are black organizations down South that Butler is you might say it's just like Frederick Douglas. You know who Frederick Douglas is?

P: Yes. I didn't know that about Butler though.

S: Butler is (--) Well I mean (--) It's an organization down south, which I think that they might visit here. I mean, but I think they'd really be surprised that they cited General Butler after the war in somewhere around the 1870's. And they had a plaque. They presented him with a plaque. Nobody seems to know where it is. Of course now you being in the Historical Preservation Commission, you could ask around to see if they could find it.

P: I could find out. Because I know if it's anywhere, I know a couple of people who should know where it is.

S: Well it would be an honor. If these people do show up they want a tour they could go to the cemetery, he's out there, but they certainly won't have a chance to view his home. They tore that down real quiet like. Even the lady next door didn't know it was gone until she looked out the window there and she didn't see it. She called up the police, thought somebody had stolen it. [Laughs] So they just told her no, the owner had it torn down.

P: Well okay then. I think we'll just close the tape up for today. When there is another time, then we can [unclear].

S: Yah, when (--) Oh.

P: So thank you very much.

Interview ends.